

A Second Look

Tom Faust

John wished he could bring someone he knew with him. Whether for the moral support or just. . . *Ah the hell with it.* He didn't know anyone now anyway. Plenty of friends to surround himself with, but he had turned his back on all the people he knew a long time ago. Even if they were here now they wouldn't be able to go where he was going. They hadn't been there when it had all started: the meetings, the discussions, the debates, and everything else in those days. They weren't with him then, and they weren't here now. Besides, ruminations on the choices of his past were of no use to him.

The days were getting cool and the nights were getting cold, so John slung his woolen longcoat over his shoulder before leaving the apartment. He wouldn't have needed the coat if he took a cab the few miles that he had to go, but nothing could deprive him of his walk, not even them. John knew the route by heart, a winding, intricate path that lengthened the trip but made it more enjoyable. It was, in fact, one of the few things he did truly enjoy these days--seeing the dingy hotels and scattered, greasy-spoon restaurants that lined the mostly barren streets. Every now and then a cat would walk beside him, hoping for a tiny morsel hinted at by the fishy smell blowing in from the harbor. It was real for him. He started off his secret way, his coat now buttoned up to fend off the October chill.

Finally, he reached the club. He was late, as usual, but they didn't mind and neither did he, really. John felt warm even though he had checked his coat at the door and some of the windows were cracked open to let in the night air. Indeed, he found that his palms were unusually sweaty and, upon passing a mirror, saw that his natural pale complexion had reddened considerably. He really couldn't help it though, knowing what was to come. Their reaction had dominated his thoughts on the way to the club, so much that it took his mind off the walk. In fact, once, upon looking up, John realized that he had missed a turn and had to backtrack a full block.

John began to notice the gazes of the group he was talking with linger on him a little too long, so he excused himself and drifted toward a window after lifting a glass of champagne from a server's tray. He had hoped that the breeze would cool him down, but it only succeeded in giving his skin a clamminess it had not possessed before and added to John's overall discomfort.

Soon enough, Vincent sought him out as John knew he would.

"Johnathan, are you feeling well?"

"Yes, thank you, Vincent. Just a little tired this evening."

"I tell you, you must quit taking those silly walks of yours. A taxi would keep you out of the cold and you might arrive on time for once."

"Vincent, I—"

"Yes, yes I know, you enjoy them. Please join us now, won't you?"

As John began to mingle once again among the *litterati*, he listened to the conversations going on around him. The group he had left earlier was still discussing David, another was comparing Seurat to the impressionist movement as a whole, and a third, smaller group was extolling the merits of Eliot. God, how he loathed Eliot.

He had worried about this night excessively over the past two weeks, outlining the date on his calendar with a thick, black marker. John's confidence continued to wane as he thought about bringing the topic into casual conversation. He wanted to leave, but that was impossible. He was already as much of an outsider to the group as they would indulge. John had heard the whispered speculation on his presence, his age, and his ideas. If only he was a little younger. When he was their age it was so much easier. . . but that was what this was all about, wasn't it? His life in their world.

Examining his life in minute detail recently is what had driven John to this thinking. In earlier days it had been a novelty. He was the angry young man that was written about by those he criticized. He took nothing on precedent, respecting little, and genuinely liked even less. The spark of conviction in his eyes that had characterized him and which others had remarked upon, that same spark he now recognized when he looked at Vincent and the others, was gone. The spark hadn't been replaced by any dullness, it just wasn't there anymore.

Could he really live through this night? Remembering how he had scorned those not enlightened enough to understand him when he was younger caused John to shiver momentarily. How was he supposed to explain what had happened?

"Well, then, you see, I was walking back from the club a few weeks ago when I suddenly realized that I hate my very existence and feel that the past

twenty-odd years of my life have been a complete waste."

What a thought! The old man leaps upon a soapbox, speaks his eternal wisdom, and retreats back into his cave never to be heard from again. It would happen sooner or later, wouldn't it? If it doesn't, would he find the satisfaction that had thus far eluded him some years later debating the same things he was debating now and had debated years before? What if, when he finally catches a glimpse of higher meaning from the debutante sitting next to him, she turns and explains that he has misunderstood her point entirely.

There was so much he had seen and missed, so much he had passed by without a second look. He never took time to smell the roses because he couldn't. John had never seen that the roses were there. *Let Vincent be the brooding, introspective hero*, John thought. He'd much rather play the faithful manservant that retired silently to the garden.

How he longed to tread upon those beaches which he had only read about and then insulted from being trite. Only when he walked on a shoreline without any thought but that of his next step would he know that he was free, but how to explain that to them? They will only exchange contemptuous glances, dismiss it as a joke, or laugh outright. *They can't understand. How can I make them understand? They'll never—*

A thin smile appeared on his lips and, in the middle of a brilliant and scathing diatribe against the cubists Vincent was delivering, he loudly cleared his throat. John waited until all eyes in the room were on him. Then, in a soft voice, he said "I'm sorry people, but you must excuse me. I have more pressing matters which require my attention."

He walked down the stairs and into the warm glow of the streetlight without even bothering to retrieve his coat.

The Country Quarry

If I could,
I would walk to the cliff
above the limestone quarry
stand on the edge,
and look down to the cold yellow floor.

I would take my stress,
fears,
inabilities, and
faults,
and form each into a crystal figurine,

and throw them
with all my strength.
Then watch as they float silently
down,
exploding into shards against
the floor.

--Clay Jones